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Antibody Testing

Illinois Department of Public Health

What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a fatal disease that causes the body to lose its natural protection against infection. People with AIDS are vulnerable to infections, including unusual types of pneumonia and rare forms of skin cancer that a healthy person usually can fight off.

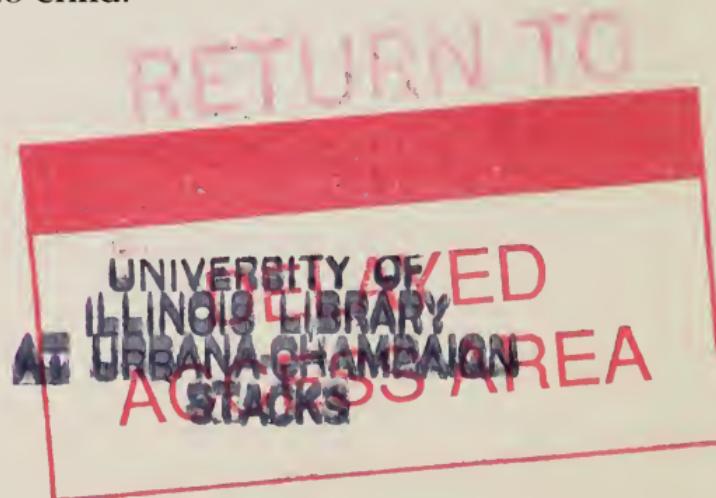
What causes AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus called Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which attacks certain white blood cells that help protect the body against infection.

How does someone get AIDS?

AIDS is a hard disease to catch. However, both men and women **can** get AIDS and can give the virus to someone else in several ways:

- Through vaginal, anal or oral sexual intercourse with someone — male or female — who has been infected with the AIDS virus.
- Through direct blood-to-blood contact. For example, by sharing needles used to shoot IV drugs. Small amounts of blood remain in these needles.
- From an infected pregnant woman to her unborn child. Breastfeeding may be a way of transmitting the AIDS virus from mother to child.



The AIDS virus cannot be spread through:

- ▲ Hugging.
- ▲ Shaking hands.
- ▲ Being near an infected person who is coughing or sneezing.
- ▲ Eating food prepared or touched by an infected person.
- ▲ Giving blood.

What is an HIV (AIDS) antibody test?

It is a blood test that can determine whether the antibodies to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, are present in a person's blood. Antibodies are produced after infection with HIV. There is no test for AIDS itself.

Should I take one of these tests?

You should seriously consider taking an AIDS antibody test if you:

- are a homosexual or bisexual male.
- inject drugs.
- have sexual relationships with several partners.
- are a hemophiliac.
- have sex or have had sex with someone who falls into one of the above categories.

The decision to take or not to take an AIDS antibody test is a very personal choice. That's why counseling is a large part of the Illinois Department of Public Health's testing procedure. Every person sits down individually with a trained professional at various stages of testing...before, during and after the actual blood test.

What kind of counseling is provided?

In the first counseling session, individuals receive complete information on AIDS and HIV testing to help them determine whether they should be tested.

After the test, counselors explain test results and discuss ways to reduce the risk of getting or spreading the disease.

The counseling process helps those tested better comprehend the impact that AIDS has had — and will have — on their own lives and on those around them. Counseling also helps people understand changes they must make in their behavior to reduce the risk of getting or transmitting AIDS.

Where are the HIV (AIDS) antibody tests given?

Anonymous, confidential counseling and testing are available at many local health departments throughout the state. Call the Illinois Department of Public Health toll-free AIDS hotline at 1-800-AID-AIDS for the location nearest you. Or contact your personal physician to arrange for a test.

Exactly how is HIV (AIDS) antibody testing done?

The actual HIV antibody test is done in three steps.

First, after pre-test counseling, a blood sample is drawn and sent to the laboratory for a test called the ELISA (Enzyme Linked Immunosorbent Assay).

If the results of the first test are positive, a second ELISA test is done.

If the second ELISA is also positive, an additional test, called the Western Blot, is performed. Based on these findings, physicians and other medical specialists can determine if antibodies to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, are present in your blood.

It is important to emphasize that none of these tests are foolproof. Whether the result is positive or negative, results must be interpreted for each individual by a knowledgeable health care professional.

What does a negative test mean?

It means that no antibodies to the AIDS virus have been found in your blood. This usually means you have not been infected with the virus.

If you have engaged in high-risk behavior within the last few months, you may be infected even if your body hasn't produced antibodies. In this case, your test will be negative, even though you could still develop AIDS later.

What does a positive test mean?

A positive test means that you have been infected with the virus that causes AIDS. But don't panic. The test is only one part of your total health picture. A positive test does not necessarily mean you will develop AIDS. A significant number of people with positive antibody tests do develop AIDS, but the exact percentage is not yet known.

It is recommended that you see a doctor so that your health as a whole can be evaluated.

Once you are infected, you will remain infected for the rest of your life. So, it is important that you understand how to prevent the spread of the disease both for your health and the health of those you care about.

If my test is positive, how should I change my behavior?

If you test positive, don't worry about normal contact with family and friends. Hugging, shaking hands and other types of casual contact will NOT spread AIDS, if, in fact, you are infected.

Normal contact with fellow employees at work will not put them at risk. (People who work in certain health care environments need to observe special precautions. They should contact their local health department or employer for specific recommendations.)

In terms of sexual activity, it is best to abstain from vaginal, oral or anal sex altogether. If you remain sexually active, you must advise your partner of the results of your antibody test. Routine use of condoms will significantly reduce your chances of spreading AIDS. Counseling can help answer questions about unsafe sexual behavior.

Also, do not donate blood or plasma, sperm, body organs or other tissues.

And, if you inject drugs, never share needles. The best way to eliminate this means of spreading AIDS is to get off drugs completely.

If my test is negative, do I still need to change my behavior?

If your test is negative, you should protect yourself against future infection. To avoid infection through sex, abstain or maintain a relationship where both partners are faithful. Routine use of condoms will significantly reduce your chances of getting AIDS. And, if you do drugs, don't share needles.

Can people who test positive still have children?

If you are a woman who has tested positive or if your sexual partner has tested positive, it is best to avoid or postpone pregnancy until more is learned about the AIDS virus. An infected woman runs the risk of giving birth to an infected baby.





The Facts for Life

- A person infected with AIDS may have no symptoms, but can spread the disease.
- AIDS is spread through sex with an infected partner. Both men and women can spread or catch the AIDS virus.
- To avoid infection through sex, abstain or maintain a relationship where both partners are faithful.
- Using condoms significantly reduces the chances of getting AIDS.
- Infected pregnant women can pass AIDS to their unborn children.
- AIDS is spread by sharing needles.
- Donating blood is safe.
- AIDS is not spread by hugs or handshakes.
- An estimated 1.5 million people in the U.S. are infected with the AIDS virus.
- There is no cure or vaccine for AIDS.

Where can I get more information on AIDS and AIDS testing?

Talk with your physician or local health department. You also can call the Illinois Department of Public Health toll-free AIDS hotline at 1-800-AID-AIDS.

All of your questions will be answered in strict confidence.